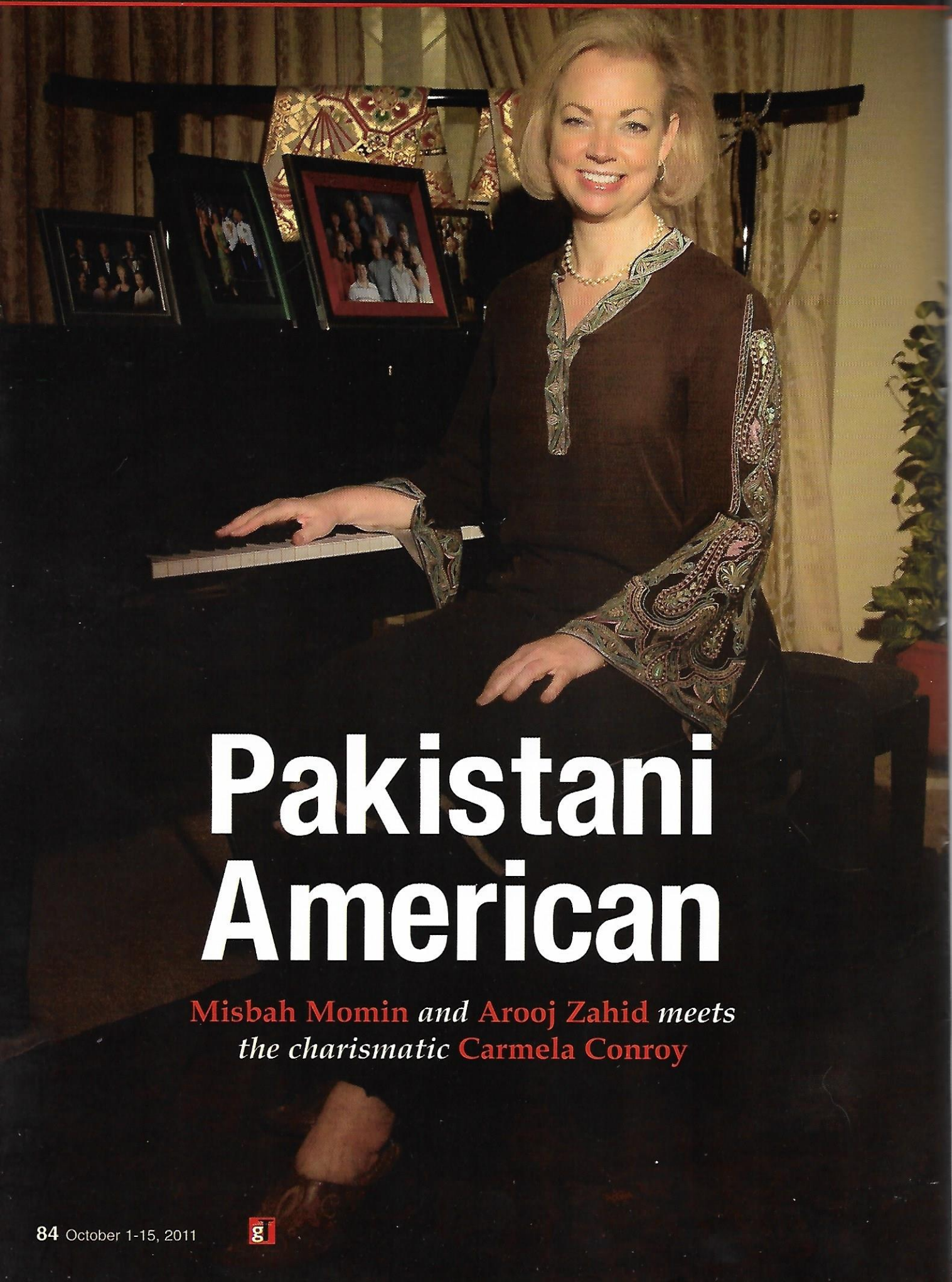

Pakistani American

Misbah Momin *and* **Arooj Zahid** *meets the charismatic* **Carmela Conroy**

She rarely dressed in anything but Pakistani designer creations -- shalwar kameezes in silks and cottons, saris with sequins and light gota-dabka work. Her bright blonde hair and fair complexion were giveaways and her toned body and erect bearing indications of her high-powered professional status (she couldn't have been mistaken for a self-effacing gori wife of an overbearing Pakistani gent). Camela Conroy served as the US Consul General in Lahore for nearly two years and has just been posted out to a Scandinavian country. From the frying pan to the fridge, as it were.

Conroy's tour of duty coincided with a nose dive in US-Pak relations. It was on her watch that Raymond Davies, the CIA contractor, gunned down two thieves who tried to rob him in Lahore's crowded Mozang Chungi, and where a speeding US Consulate vehicle, going to Davies' rescue, ran down an innocent pedestrian. It was enough trouble for a diplomat but then Conroy had cut her teeth in Kabul, on an earlier posting, so she was no stranger to danger. And then the septuagenarian American businessman Warren Weinstein was kidnapped from his Model Town home a couple of months ago. It was enough to get the toughest of professionals to throw in the towel. But not Conroy. She said till the day she left Lahore that she loved the place, had made many friends and was deeply committed to ironing out the difficulties in the increasingly rocky US-Pak relationship.

We too will miss her, for she was as essential a part of Lahore's social circuit as any of the city's celebrated glitterati. When we conducted this interview, we were shown into a reception room with eclectic furnishings; we asked her about the Pakistani and Afghan paintings and the Japanese furniture. Conroy has an eye for the unique and the decorative, that's possibly why she took so heartilty to Pakistani fashion. Born in Spokane, Washington, in 1962, she attended school there and went on to the University of Washington, Seattle, for her Bachelor's degree in International Trade and Investment. She graduated to the University of Washington School of Law for a doctorate and later joined US Naval War College School of Command and Staff for her Masters in National Security and Strategic Studies. By 2004, she was all done with her education and then

decided to join the foreign service.

Conroy speaks warmly of her family and friends' support during her long internship as a student. She says their's was a loving milieu and her father who had worked all his life for the railroads, encouraged her to aim high and achieve her dreams. "My parents thought they'd have a baby boy when I was expected and they were going to name me Shawn Patrick. When I showed up, they called my paternal grandparents and my grandmother suggested they name me 'Carmela' which means God's vineyard", she chuckled. Conroy told us that her parents have been a great inspiration to her. "They taught by example. The most important things in our family were hard work, honesty, and integrity. Two of the phrases I heard most often growing up were, 'if it's worth doing, it's worth doing right' (usually following a performance review when I hadn't done homework or a chore to their standards) and, 'if your

friends were jumping off a bridge, would you jump, too?' (usually following my plea to do or have something because somebody else got to, even if it was harmful/foolish)."

Being in the foreign service, Conroy says the lesson she learnt first and most durably is that people all over the world care about the same things -- peace, jobs, health, family and traditions.

There was also a great love of music in her family. Conroy's mother liked classical music and played the violin while her father liked jazz and played the trumpet. "I took up trumpet in junior high school, and played in the jazz band through grade 11. By grade 12, I dropped the band in order to better focus on debate and student governance activities. Mom and Dad encouraged us all to be active." She says she used to bicycle to the public library every Saturday (except in winter) with her brother. "We would load up our bike racks with as many books as we

could carry. I was in debate club and student government most of the time, too."

She remembers her childhood and says, "all the kids in the neighbourhood swam, bicycled, rode horses, and played games in each other's yards. Kick-the-can, dodge ball, snowball fights and duck-duck-goose, depending on the season. When we got old enough to get driver's licenses, we'd drive to the lake or river to swim." She told us that she has poor eye-to-hand coordination so she didn't play organized sports.

Along the way, in the course of her studies, Conroy also studied Japanese and learnt to speak and write it. When she was offered a job as a teacher in Japan, she jumped at it and perfected her Japanese while there. She learnt to appreciate the subtleties of Japanese culture. "The Japanese tend to be reticent, careful of their words and avoid direct disagreement. Plus, when I spoke with the Japanese they would be sensitive about my language limitations and go easy on me. A hundred Americans just starting law school couldn't be more different. I was exhausted after one of our social get-togethers, surrounded by glib native English speakers eager for an opportunity to disagree!"

She returned to her education in the US and at the Naval War College, she says they had intramural sports teams and she played softball during the first (autumn) term. "One of my classmates, on the first day, asked, 'whose wife are you?' I said, 'nobody's!' He asked, surprised, 'then what are you doing here?' When I answered that I was a student, he said, 'oh, good for you!' It was good for me, and we became friends."

After the Naval College, she began working for the foreign service. How did that happen? "By accident! I discovered the Foreign Service on my way to achieving my dream of becoming an attorney. Once I became an attorney, and a litigator, I loved it. But I had been bit by the travel bug, and the pay scale and leave schedule of a deputy prosecuting attorney couldn't satisfy that interest. So, I took the exam, and have been doing this since I passed it and made it through the various clearances." She said that initially, the opportunity to travel the world drew her to this profession and the sense that it would use more of her skills. "Since joining State I have reconceptualised this: it's not just an opportunity to travel, it's an opportunity to move around the world. It has also given me the chance to develop the skills and knowledge I already had -- Japanese language, the experience of living in a culture with a completely different world view than that of the United States, legal training and experience -- to add completely different areas of expertise I never imagined."

Keeping fit is a lifestyle choice Conroy made early. She says the secret of her healthy lifestyle is not gym but Nintendo's new game Wii. She took us to her private rooms and showed us the video game and even demonstrated it and urged us to play it with her. For a few minutes it felt as if we were all teenagers playing video games. There is something about Conroy that makes Pakistani women warm to her. She told us, "Pakistan's greatest unused resource is its woman. Its right here in Lahore and Karachi and Islamabad and all over the hinterland. It's astonishing when I see women of capacity and capability and find that they are terribly under utilised."

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The challenges of moving on include the stresses of doing so. "It's not easy changing homes, changing jobs, changing bosses, and separation from friends and family." She says people in the Foreign Service have to cope with all those things at the same time. "There's a lot of little things about settling into a new place—finding a hair stylist, good bread, learning the local traffic laws, etc—that we have to do while we are simultaneously learning a new job, meeting new co-workers, making new friends. Meanwhile, we're coping with separation from family and friends and colleagues from our previous assignment. The flip side is that it's interesting and exciting. I get paid to learn to learn new things—quite a bonus for somebody who had to work their way through school. I meet new people, make new friends, understand connections between things, and work on issues I had no idea even existed until I became responsible for working on the US Government's policy on that issue as it relates to foreign affairs. And I have found that there are certain people God puts in our paths over and over again."

She said her profession provides her with a good living, better than she ever imagined for herself. She wants to take on positions of greater responsibility while diversifying her life portfolio and enjoying it. When we asked her about love, marriage and kids, she said, "Raising kids seem highly unlikely at this age, but who knows, if it's in the stars it will happen. Insh'Allah!"

As we said our goodbyes, Conroy recalled her most memorable moments in Lahore. "It was my first night in Lahore; I was invited to a party at Haveli Barood Khana and fell asleep before almost anybody else had arrived at the party. Then dining at Coocoo's Den with Ambassador Patterson almost immediately after I arrived; Secretary Clinton's visit in October 2009; behind-the-scenes tours at Punjab's World Heritage Sites; being included in weddings and fashion shows and lunches and dinners and polo and qawwali and karaoke parties and school graduations and award ceremonies and to meet new babies and see gardens in bloom. Most of this has happened in Lahore, but when I've visited Karachi, Bahawalpur, Rohtas, Sheikhupura—anywhere—people have been 'recklessly hospitable'. Someone else taught me that phrase, and it sums up my precious memories of Pakistan."

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